

The Sound Inside a Shell

by Alice in Potterland

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But for Alice Emerson and the rest of her class, that was simply irrelevant. The outside world stopped at Hogwarts' gates until tragedy in their fifth year brought it violently to the forefront.

Prologue - A Day at the Office

Chapter 1 of 2

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August, present day

Early afternoon

Ministry of Magic

Harry Potter drummed his fingers on his desk. He sighed, pulled his fingers through his unmanageable black hair, and pushed up his glasses. Years after the battle of Hogwarts, years after the defeat of Voldemort, the darkest wizard of all time, after marriage and the birth of three children, Harry could hardly survive a day at the office. True, Auror work was challenging. It demanded much from him and never failed to be interesting, dangerous, or at the very least, a reliable source of entertainment. But recently, the Ministry hit a successful run, notable for its peaceful flourish in which Aurors had little to do. Most days, they sat in their office chairs in their small, claustrophobic cubicles and filled in paperwork. Boring, investigative stuff - common secretary work. Harry was not one to complain, but truth is, he was bored and suffering from a bout of cabin fever.

What he needed was a worthwhile distraction, a task that would allow him to leave the office, explore a bit. He stared blankly at the pictures on his desk. A wedding picture of him and Ginny echoed the wedding photo of his parents next to it. Albus grinning sheepishly as he clutched his first wand. Lily's first lost tooth. James with Harry's niece and nephew, Hugo and Rose Weasley, playing a game of Exploding Snap. A picture of the Order before Sirius died, and beside it, a picture of the original Order. He smiled absently at his parents, waving to him from the picture frame.

Scanning over the faces, Harry sighed. So many good people had died fighting Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Many of the witches and wizards in the picture had fallen to dark wizards at the battle of Hogwarts, if not before. Most had died before Harry himself was born, some as soon as a few months after the picture was taken. His eyes

passed over the picture for what must have been the umpteenth time. James, Lily, Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, Snape, the Longbottoms, Wormtail ... he stopped.

Pulling the picture from his desk, he peered closer at the photo. A face Harry had never noticed before beamed up at him, a small auburn-haired young woman. She was standing between Alice Longbottom and Hagrid, half hidden behind Hagrid's mass. Sirius stood diagonally behind her and - Harry squinted into the picture - it looked like their hands were joined behind Alice Longbottom's left thigh.

That's strange, Harry thought, *I wonder how I never saw her before. No one ever mentioned her* Harry's heart sank as he realized no one was alive who would know who she was. Except maybe...

Harry pushed himself up from his seat, leaving a considerable stack of paperwork untouched on his desk. The nearest fireplace was down the hall next to the lift. Grabbing a handful of Floo powder from a small bin next to the fireplace, Harry threw it into the fire and clearly enunciated, "Hagrid's hut." The flames burned higher, signaling clearance to travel.

Ducking down to squeeze out of the fireplace, Harry heard a low chuckle from the far side of the room. "Haven' seen yeh in quite a while, Harry! Heard yeh comin'. Couldn' mistake yer coughin' if I tried." Harry grinned and allowed Hagrid to pull him into a hug, poking the edges of the photo's frame into Harry's ribs. It had been several years since Harry had visited Hagrid at his home. They met occasionally at the Leaky Cauldron for a drink, a particularly welcome treat after an uneventful day at the Ministry. Hagrid's beard, bushy as ever, sported a fair few more gray hairs.

Harry glanced around the room. Nothing had changed since he'd last seen it. Hagrid invited him to sit down, but Harry declined. "I'm not officially supposed to be here, Hagrid, but I was wondering." He showed Hagrid the picture and pointed to the unidentified girl. "That woman standing next to you - I don't know who she is. I thought I might try to find her, if I could. Thank her or..." His voice trailed as Hagrid grabbed the picture from his hand.

"Oh, her." He scrutinized the picture with disapproval. "Tha's Alice Emerson. She was yer mum's bes' friend, back in their Hogwarts days. Disappeared from the Order after Sirius was sent ter Azkaban... worked at the Ministry las' I heard o' her." Harry's heart raced - she would be easy to find. If she'd worked at the Ministry, her name would be listed in a registry and Harry could contact her without leaving the Ministry offices. The perfect situation: an adventure without the danger of being caught off duty.

"Thanks, Hagrid. I'm off - Leaky Cauldron next Thursday?" Harry offered, stepping back toward the fireplace. Hagrid's face fell. "I'll bring the family, too, if you'd like. The kids have missed you since school let out." Harry's children, James, Albus, and Lily, were favorites of Hagrid. He'd known them since they were born and treated them specially in his Care of Magical Creatures classes. Over the summer holiday, Harry was certain that Hagrid missed them.

"I'll see yeh then, I s'ppose. Can' say no ter seein' my favorite students, now, could I?" Hagrid agreed, satisfied with the prospect of visiting the kids. It had been a while since he'd talked to Ginny, too. "Tell Ginny I said hello."

"I will." Harry gathered a fist full of Floo powder from an earthen jug on Hagrid's mantle and tossed it into the flames. "Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror Headquarters." The flames faded from bright orange to green. Harry stepped into the fireplace and quickly waved at Hagrid before being swept into the Floo network.

Once back at the office, Harry stifled a disappointed moan. Even the atmosphere made him cringe. Picture in hand, he hurried back to his cubicle, ignoring the stack on his desk that had grown even taller in his absence. A folded piece of paper flitted irritably above his head. Swiping it aside, Harry bent down to open the bottom drawer of a small filing cabinet that tucked neatly under his desk. At the bottom of the drawer, buried under several files on notorious dark wizards that had long since been thrown into Azkaban, a thick dusty Ministry registry sat molding. Harry lifted the rubbish on top to dig the registry out; it contained detailed descriptions of each Ministry office, each Ministry position, and every rule and procedure of the Ministry. It also contained, at the very back past the indexes, a list of Ministry workers. This list contained everyone from custodians to the Minister himself, past and present, and was charmed to update itself. Flipping to the "E"s, Harry scanned the list for "Emerson," hoping she hadn't married since the last time Hagrid spoke to her.

"Emerson, Aberman. Emerson, Aidan..." Harry murmured. "Ah, Emerson, Alice." His eyebrows shot up in surprise. She was still working at the Ministry! "Occupation: Unspeakeable. Years of service: 1981 to present. Currently: In." Slamming the book closed, Harry replaced it in the drawer on top of the discarded files. She was in the Ministry, right now, at work. Harry grabbed the picture of the original Order again from his desk and hurried down the hall, careful to avoid eye contact with his coworkers.

His best friend, Ron, peeked over from his cubicle. "Harry, where're you - "

"Nowhere, Ron. Just heading to the loo."

"With that picture?" But Harry was already around the corner. Ron shook his head. "Some days..."

In the lift, Harry pressed the button for the eighth floor. He exited into the Atrium and entered another lift for the ninth level, the Department of Mysteries. His blood raced; he hadn't been this busy in weeks.

When the elevator landed on the ninth floor, Harry walked out into a plain, dark hallway. This place always gave him chills; so many horrible memories plagued his mind. The last time he'd seen Sirius was through that doorway. The familiar black door loomed over him. He realized, with some embarrassment, that he didn't quite know what to do next. How would he find her from this point on? The Department of Mysteries was just that. Once he stepped through that door, he knew he'd find a circular room with twelve identical doors. Harry took a steady breath and knocked.

The witch that answered looked ruffled and a bit aggravated. "What do you want?" she asked shortly, fist resting on her hip. Her wand was tucked behind her ear, and in her other hand she clutched a ladle covered in reddish brown sludge. Harry shuddered to think what concoction she'd just been experimenting with.

"Um, I'm looking for Alice Emerson." Harry held the photo behind his back.

Eying him suspiciously, the witch nodded and pulled the door open wider, moving aside to let Harry in. They were standing in the same circular room he'd had the misfortune of entering his fifth year at Hogwarts. It seemed like just yesterday and so long ago. That room had that strange effect on him, a disorienting nauseating feeling. Perhaps it was the blue flames flickering over the shiny floor, achieving the effect of one walking on water. "Right this way," she grunted, heading assuredly toward one of the doors. She pushed it open.

Inside, a small room held about ten large desks. Only four were occupied. At the far end of the room, at a desk facing the wall, sat a slight, auburn-haired woman. She was hunched over some papers, and as Harry followed the witch closer to her, he saw that she was labeling a detailed map of a land Harry didn't recognize, illuminated by a bright lamp.

"Emerson, you've got a visitor." Alice grunted and held up a finger. The witch with the ladle gestured to the chair next to Alice's desk and Harry sat down. He waited patiently for a few minutes while Alice worked. Finally, she looked up.

Her misty blue eyes blinked up at Harry, and it took a second for her to focus on him in the dim light of the room. When she realized who he was, her breath caught and her eyes immediately welled with tears. Within moments, she was sobbing. Harry sat with the picture on his lap feeling extremely awkward and out-of-place. Alice turned away and opened the top drawer of her desk.

Pulling a tissue out of the drawer, Alice wiped the tears from her nose and chin. Harry cleared his throat and readjusted his glasses on his nose. "Um, I'm, er, Harry Potter. I think you knew my mum? Is this you?" He indicated the smiling young woman in the photo. The witch sitting before him looked remarkably similar, hardly changed but for the faint streaks of silver in her reddish-brown hair and thin lines in her forehead and corners of her eyes.

Alice gingerly took the picture. She nodded as she studied the photo, tears filling her eyes again. She stared at the faces in the picture before she finally spoke. "We were so young then. You..." She looked up at Harry's face and softly touched his cheek. The gesture reminded him of his mother-in-law, Molly Weasley - it was a protective,

matronly touch. He wondered what made her feel protective and matronly toward him. "You were just a baby. The son of my two best friends..." She choked on the last two words and lowered her eyes back to the photo.

Harry's blood pounded in his temples. This woman was his parents' best friend. She knew them when they were alive, had gone to school with them, and knew him when he was born. "Could you... I mean, if it's not too hard. Could you maybe tell me about them?"

She smiled tenderly and looked up into his eyes; Harry anticipated her next words, but she didn't say them. She didn't say, like everyone else from his childhood, that he had his mother's eyes.

Instead, with a twinkle in her eye that momentarily brought the young woman from the photo back to life, she settled in her chair, placed the picture on her desk, took a deep breath and began, "It was our fifth year when life really took hold of us..."

Chapter 1: Hope Comes Home

Chapter 2 of 2

The fifth-year Gryffindors start the year that will change their lives! Alice gets a letter from a newlywed friend, Remus notices something strange about Alice, and James notices something a bit wonderful about Lily Evans.

September 1st, 1975

Evening

Great Hall

Alice Emerson picked absentmindedly at the chocolate éclair on her plate for a good two minutes before she noticed that it was, in fact, a chocolate éclair, not the crust of the pie she'd been eating moments before. She was so engrossed in conversation that the food had changed from main course to dessert without her realising it. She felt momentarily disappointed - she'd wanted to finish that pie - before she turned her attention back to the animated discussion across the dessert-laden table.

James Potter and Sirius Black, fellow fifth-year Gryffindors, were going on about their summer adventures; it seemed Sirius had spent a great deal of time at James' house, which was unusual since Sirius' parents usually kept him under lock and key over the summer (according to his lamentations from Welcome Feasts of previous years.)

"Right, so Sirius said to her, he said 'Have you confessed your sins, my child?' And of course, she said 'Who said that?!'" James snorted with laughter and threw his voice into a squeaky falsetto, a terrible imitation of a woman's voice in Alice's opinion. James and Sirius were notorious for using the Invisibility Cloak James had inherited from his father to play silly pranks on poor, unsuspecting victims. His unruly black hair flopped over his forehead as he flung himself forward, clutching his stomach. Floating overhead, Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor house ghost, looked concerned before James sat back up to push his glasses back onto his nose, wheezing as he continued, "Then I said..." A snort. "I said..."

A small cult gathering had formed around the two pragmatic boys as usual. Their talent for capturing people's interests often made them the topic of discussion whether or not they were physically present themselves. Sixth-year Emmeline Vance in particular was especially enraptured.

Sirius took up the anecdote. "He said, 'I have come baring penitence...'" He clamped onto the shoulder of James' robe and bellowed, "... and you've been a naughty, naughty girl!" They exploded with riotous laughter, gulping for air, oblivious to the ruffled glares from several Ravenclaws at the table behind them. The Gryffindor table broke out into cheers and whistles. "She looked like she was going to cry or slap someone but couldn't decide where to aim!"

Alice's eyes crinkled with a smile as she took a sip from a stein of chilled butterbeer. Remus Lupin, one of Sirius' and James' best mates, stood up from his seat for Prefect call, raised an eyebrow at the two chortling boys, and shook his head.

"Prongs, that makes no sense. It's not even funny... and it's terribly rude, I might add, to say those sorts of things to women you don't even know..." His scolding faded as Sirius cast him an irritated, disapproving glance. James lifted a spoonful of his favourite strawberry ice cream with a smirk. "Well, anyway, I'm off for Prefect call. Lily?"

Lily Evans, Alice's closest friend, threw one more blackberry into her mouth and sucked the black juice off her fingertips as she stood up. "Yeah, I'm coming." Her dark red hair was wavy and pulled into a hasty ponytail, a loose tendril curled over one of her bright green eyes. She grinned mischievously at Alice, mouthed "Good luck," eyes flicking pointedly toward the two rowdy boys across the table, and turned to follow Remus toward the Head Boy and Girl, Hufflepuff Matthew Campbell and Slytherin Isabella Pearson, at the top of the Hall.

Alice turned to fellow fifth-year Gryffindor Sam Trent, a tall, friendly boy with thick tousled gold hair. Her mouth grew into a fabulous grin and Sam smiled back, locking his green-hazel eyes onto hers. They engaged in a staring contest for a brief moment and then broke their stares with defeated laughter. Rubbing her dry, itchy eyes, Alice opened her mouth to say "How was your summer?" but was cut off by a silence that fell across the Hall.

Headmaster Professor Dumbledore stood up to make his Welcoming Speech, and Alice twisted around to face the Head table, aiming her attention at the stately grey-bearded man at the podium. Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, sat just right of Dumbledore's empty seat and shot discreet glances toward the Gryffindor table, taking mental notes of which students whispered to one another during Dumbledore's welcome. They would be given detention later if they weren't first years, who were understandably excited and couldn't help but to commiserate with wide-eyed observations, or seventh years, who had sat through enough Welcoming speeches to earn a stray comment or two.

"Welcome to a fresh new year..." Dumbledore's voice reverberated off the stone walls and everyone's attention was on him. A young Hufflepuff giggled and was promptly shushed by the students around her. "... at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. I'd like to extend a special welcome to our new first years; I trust you will find Hogwarts to be a comfortable and enriching home-away-from-home. As for the rest of you, I hope your stomachs are full and fear that your summer brains may quite possibly be empty, yearning to be filled with knowledge and wizardry."

Alice and Sam began to play a silent game of "I Spy" using hand gestures, nods, and facial expressions while Dumbledore reminded the students of important and commonly-broken school rules. Afterward, everyone stood to sing the school song; Alice and Sam applauded as Sirius and James loudly bellowed their own lively and terribly off-key version of the song. Dumbledore delivered a brief set of announcements and concluded with, "This is going to be a positively delightful year, but like all good things, we must wait. Classes commence tomorrow; be awake early to receive your schedules from your Heads of House. For now, goodnight!"

Dumbledore stepped down from the podium and threw the entire Hall into chaos. Prefects, who had been gathered in a patient group near the main door, attempted to corral students toward the exits, herding first years who were still staring at the table in wonderment, confused that the food disappeared during Dumbledore's welcome.

Alice distinctly heard Remus shout, "No, no! *This way* - no, those are Ravenclaws. We have separate dormitories." She chuckled and turned toward the table again, noting that Peter Pettigrew - the fourth of James, Sirius, and Remus' group - had skilfully snatched some last bits of food to squirrel away into the pockets of his robe, now bulging with cake slices and peppermints, before the food disappeared from the table.

The rest of her fifth-year house-mates were still conversing; none showed any signs of moving from their seats. Only students from lower years were heading out of the Hall. James and Sirius whispered conspiratorially with Dorcas Meadowes - probably about the yearly Quidditch tryouts that were to take place later that month; Sam chatted with Mary MacDonald and Amba Bhatti, gesturing wildly to punctuate each climax within his story, his eyes expressive and bright.

"Ready to go?" Alice asked Peter, her elbows crossed and rested nonchalantly on the table.

Peter glanced at the friends around him and shrugged. "Sure," he said, rising gingerly after Alice, careful not to crush the delicacies in his pockets. Once the other Gryffindors noticed the two standing, they lazily followed suit.

It was late and the weariness Alice had accumulated throughout the busy day of travelling was catching up to her; her bones seemed to harden and become heavy, weighing her down as she trudged down hallways, up staircases, and through the portrait of the Fat Lady, and later, pulling her into the soft, familiar comfort of her bed in the 5th year girls' dorm in the Gryffindor Tower.

September 2nd, 1975

Early morning

Gryffindor Tower

Alice turned over, pretending to be asleep. She ignored Lily's rough whispers and tried as hard as she could to ignore Lily's rough shaking. Her shoulder felt as though it was halfway out of its socket, but she kept her eyes closed. The morning sun spilled through the thick glass windows, reflecting off the lake and rippling over the soft folds in Alice's bedspread. After a few moments, Lily started shouting.

"Alice, I know you're awake! You're a horrible actress. Quit being a prat and get up - McGonagall's downstairs with our schedules." With that, Lily left Alice's bedside and disappeared into the stairwell, presumably to visit the loo to change into her school robes. Alice mumbled and pulled her comforter to her chin. The morning air was uncomfortably chilly, licking at her cheeks and ears. For a moment, Alice slipped back into sleep until a stern voice travelled up the stairs and through the open door.

"Ladies, if you're not up yet, I suggest you get out of bed this instant before you miss breakfast," McGonagall shouted from the common room. Alice's eyes crept open, and with tremendous effort she ambled out of bed, wincing as her bare feet shuffled over the cold stone floor to the end of her bed where her trunk sat waiting. Flipping open the lid, Alice rummaged through her belongings for a reasonably unwrinkled outfit, and pulling off her nightgown, changed in the room; Lily returned with her night clothes neatly folded in her hands just as Alice yanked her robe over her shoulders.

"Where are the other girls?" Alice gestured to the three other empty beds. She pulled her hair into what she hoped would be a semi-passable up-do.

"Already downstairs. Dorcas woke up early to go out to the pitch, Amba went to breakfast early because she figured she'd have a class the first shift, and Mary - well, you know." In their third year, Mary, a notoriously light sleeper, once spent an entire night pacing the Gryffindor common room just because the moonlight was hitting her face the wrong way. Every morning, she woke ahead of the rest of the girls. Lily tucked a curled strand of hair behind her ear and dusted off her robe, which - Alice noted - was lint free. "Ready to go?" Lily's voice was stiff; she sounded anxious and Alice knew she was making herself nervous about Prefect duties, which were piled onto a prospectively stressful class schedule.

Sighing heavily, Alice nodded and grabbed her eleven-inch willow wand from her trunk. She really needed something like an alarm clock. Not being able to wake herself did not bode well for Alice's resolution to be more responsible this year in preparation for an apprenticeship with the Ministry once she graduated Hogwarts.

Same day

6:47 am

Gryffindor common room

"Now that we're all gathered - late, as usual - let me begin by welcoming, again, our newest Gryffindors." McGonagall beamed through her glasses at the ten first years who looked sheepishly around the room at their upperclassmen. The common room was packed; all seventy Gryffindors, ten for each of seven years, crammed into the circular room. They sat on the arms of couches and armchairs, gathered in seated bunches on the floor, and stood on the staircases to the dorms. McGonagall stood on the small table in front of the fireplace, clutching a thick stack of papers in her hands. "We're going to have a great year, and I want to start us off with a few announcements and reminders. Firstly, tryouts for Quidditch will be posted no later than..."

James yawned, clipping off the end of McGonagall's sentence. He was sitting on the back of the largest couch closest to McGonagall's table. His hazel eyes fought to stay open under his glasses. With a tired effort, James ran his fingers through his unruly black hair, a gesture that seemed a feeble attempt to rally himself awake. Next to him, Sirius' head drooped forward. James silently nudged him and Sirius straightened back up, looking a bit like a robot being charged to life.

Celebrating the commencement of their fifth year, they'd spent the entire night partying with their dorm-mates. Earlier the previous day, capitalising on Peter's singular talents for hoarding confections and repelling suspicion, James convinced the small, plump boy to sneak treats from the Hogwarts Express trolley into his trunk while Sirius created a diversion to distract the matronly women peddling overpriced sweets to the students. It was lucky for them that Remus was on Prefect patrol during this particular moment of mischief. He did not approve of theft, even in the name of a good time.

Once again in the tower for another splendid year, the boys enjoyed a bottle of Firewhiskey with their contraband - Sirius and James discovered their second year how perfunctorily Filch checked incoming trunks. Since then, they'd used this handy piece of information to bring loads of forbidden stuff into the school. Over the summer, they devised a way to smuggle alcoholic beverages into their dorm by pouring the contents of the bottle into several glass phials and placing them into Sirius' otherwise unused Potions set. Upon inspection, Filch simply assumed the phials were full of purified slug bile or a similar amber-red substance.

Throughout the night, Remus, perfect little Prefect he was, had tried to persuade the boys into their beds. "Classes start tomorrow," he reminded them. "You might have an early morning class." Moony was always puncturing the fun mood with practicality. Wormtail, finishing off his spoils from the Welcome Feast, was perfectly content to stay up all night. The Firewhiskey proved a sufficient amount to intoxicate James, Sirius, Peter, and Remus, once he ditched his efforts at a good night's sleep and joined the celebration.

Sam Trent, the "fifth wheel" as he put it, spent a large portion of the night in the common room with a group of sixth year girls; the quartet left upstairs might have been jealous except for the fact that Sam had yet to win a girlfriend in the four previous years they'd been at Hogwarts. Later in the night, Sam finished up the untouched phials after the other four boys were satisfactorily drunk.

As McGonagall began handing out class schedules, Remus moaned. His head felt as though it were being beaten open with a very dense and solid rock. What had he been thinking of, drinking himself into a stupor the night before first classes? Taking his schedule from McGonagall, he noted that Gryffindor had History of Magic first shift after breakfast with Ravenclaw. As miserable as Binns' droning would make his hangover feel, the class could - at the least - provide an opportunity to take a rare nap. It was permissible, Remus reasoned, just this once. And Binns probably wouldn't notice.

Remus glanced over the rest of his schedule, warm brown eyes skipping thoroughly across class names, times, and shifts. He heard a groan to his left, a disgusted sigh

laced with disappointment.

Alice Emerson, dark auburn hair pulled into a loose floppy bun, frowned at her schedule. Her nose wrinkled in contempt - Remus remembered how vehemently she detested History of Magic. He smiled and noted, with a small twinge of surprise, how cute she looked.

He had never noticed that before; she was, after all, the same girl who had hexed him blind in their third year for not joining the Muggle Club, condemned him to the Hospital Wing for a week, and then refused to apologise. Last year, she voted for Peter of all people as Prefect instead of him. Retribution, she stated, for his lack of support of the Muggle Club in her time of need.

Remus remembered this with concern as he studied her again, standing on the girls' staircase and exchanging schedules with Lily and Sam, laughing at Sam's exaggerated dismay for an unsolicited scheduling tragedy. Her blue eyes shone with amusement, but Remus was relieved when James shook his shoulder, breaking him out of his unusual reverie.

"Alright, Moony?" he asked, stretching.

"Just a bit tired from last night, is all." James nodded conspiratorially and helped Remus up from his chair. The four boys tucked their schedules into their robe pockets, and after a brief conference, in which James and Sirius pointed out their free time until History of Magic, they agreed to skip breakfast.

The four eagerly pushed each other up the stairs and back into bed for a few more minutes of dreamless sleep. After a few minutes, James, Sirius, and Peter drifted into a deep sleep, chorused by a symphony of snores, grunts, and whimpers.

Remus lie awake for another few before pulling back his sheets, grabbing his wand from his nightstand, and stealing down the stairs on his way to the Great Hall for coffee.

Same day

7:05 am

Great Hall

"Remus, the mail just arrived a few minutes ago. There's a letter for you here - I think it's from your mum." Alice tossed Remus a small envelope covered in coffee stains. She ripped open the grease-blotched letter that her own tawny owl, Beatrice, dropped onto her plate of bacon.

Lily swallowed a bite of jam-covered toast and asked, "Who's it from? Home?"

Alice shook her head. "No, it's from Alice... Longbottom?!" Her voice jumped in surprise. Mary, a rather large girl with frizzy yellow hair and a wide nose, let out a delighted squeal. "She *did* marry Frank! Might have told me sooner!" Alice couldn't keep a grin off her face. Sam, Remus, Lily and Emory Greminger, the stocky sixth-year Gryffindor seeker, seemed happy with the news. Alice Longbottom, until recently known as Alice Burbank, had graduated two years before in the same class as Alice's brother, Michael Emerson. The two Alices became friends through association, the older fulfilling a mentoring elder-sister role to the younger. Michael, Alice Burbank, and Frank Longbottom were inseparable during their Hogwarts years and famously outgoing, accepting people. Everyone who knew them liked them almost instantly.

"What does she say?" Mary urged.

"Er... wishes everyone well... says to congratulate Remus and Lily on getting prefect... says to keep her updated on the Quidditch rankings. Oh..." Alice's grin twisted into a concerned frown. Brows knit, she scanned the letter.

Mirroring Alice's worried expression, Lily asked, "Nothing's wrong, is it?" The rest of the table waited impatiently for Alice to finish reading.

"You remember how I told you about Michael's new job? Well, she and Frank got jobs at the Ministry, too. They're Aurors-in-training. She says they're already requiring them to duel dark wizards, ones on Voldemort's side. They're called..." Alice retraced the letter, "Death Eaters. She says to work hard in Defence Against the Dark Arts."

Lily and Sam exchanged glances; Remus sat in silent contemplation as Mary blurted, "They're alright, though, aren't they? They haven't been hurt?" Alice shook her head.

"Not yet," Emory sighed, fiddling with his glass of pumpkin juice. Mary inhaled sharply, eyes wide with fright. Noticing her fearful expression, Emory conceded, "But they're a powerful set, aren't they? I'm sure they'll be fine. The Death Eaters won't know what hit them." He attempted a brave smile for Mary's sake.

Having recovered from her initial worry, Lily changed the subject. "History of Magic first shift. Should be fun, eh?" She smiled playfully at Alice.

"BLOODY HELL." Alice moaned, dropping her head onto the table.

"I find History of Magic fascinating," Lily goaded, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Alice glared at her, then continued, "Just our luck, isn't it? And Potions with bleeding Slytherin after that. I have an absolutely impossible schedule." She pulled her schedule from her pocket and displayed it to the table.

Monday

History of Magic with Ravenclaw (7:30-8:30)

Potions with Slytherin (8:40-10:40)

Herbology with Ravenclaw (10:50-11:50)

Lunch (12:00-1:00)

Charms with Hufflepuff (1:10-2:10)

Transfiguration (2:20-3:20)

Defence Against the Dark Arts with Hufflepuff (3:30-4:30)

Ancient Runes (4:40-6:40)

Dinner (6:50-7:50)

Muggle Studies (8:00-8:45)

Divination (8:55-9:40)

Astronomy (12:00-12:50)

"Tuesdays and Thursdays aren't bad," Alice admitted. "I've got class until 5:30. Then on Wednesdays and Fridays I've only got class until 2:30, then astronomy at night. But

what I thought was interesting," she began.

Remus interrupted her. "Transfiguration? I thought so too. Usually we have it with Slytherin, but this year it isn't noted." Lily and Mary nodded in agreement, cross-referencing their own schedules.

"Maybe McGonagall finally realised they're all hopeless," Sam offered, taking a muffin from a bowl in front of Remus. The table laughed, then launched a tirade about the likely misery of Potions class.

"It's not too bad," Lily chirped, sitting straighter in her seat.

Alice scoffed as Sam playfully tossed a muffin bit at the side of Lily's head. "Not too bad." Alice rolled her eyes. "Not too bad because Slughorn worships the ground at your feet. *That's* what's not too bad."

Same day

7:22 am

History of Magic classroom

James, Sirius, and Peter sat alone staring at the empty desks around them. They were disoriented, befuddled, and perturbed. "I think I'm going to be sick," Sirius choked, eyes darting wildly about the room.

James sat catatonic in the second desk from the far wall in the second row. Sirius was four chairs to his right and back a row. Peter sat diagonally behind James against the wall. This had never occurred before. They were the first ones in the classroom. The only other being in the room was Binns, humming pleasantly to himself as he copied the class seating roster onto the chalk board, and he didn't seem to realise the boys were there. Where was Moony when they needed him?

James nearly jumped from his desk as Remus entered the room, Lily, Alice, and Mary behind him. Remus raised an eyebrow, fixing James with a sceptical stare. Realising his manners, James stammered, "Er, yes, Remus. Lovely to see you." If anything, this only resulted in Moony's becoming even more suspicious. "You're sitting here." He gestured limply to the seat behind him and sat down.

Alice and Lily exchanged amused, though incredibly confused, glances. Checking the board, Alice noted with some annoyance that she was seated two seats in front of Peter, and thus, diagonally in front of James. Lily smirked triumphantly; she was two seats directly to his left. Nowhere near his direct line of sight.

"Damn," Alice muttered under her breath. Lily continued to smile as she sat down, waiting for Ravenclaw Jeanine Keila to arrive and sit next to her. They adored James in the way most everyone else did; he was an entertaining boy and relatively smart. However, once he turned his attention solely on one person, it tended to be rather irritating. During long stretches of time, especially in a class as dull as History of Magic, it was best to be out of his reach.

As the rest of the class filtered in, James grew uncontrollably impatient. He stood up once to let Hannah Wilson, a pretty girl with honey blond curls and a pierced bottom lip, into her seat near the wall. He turned to Sirius, who winked with a wolfish grin on his face. Clearly, he was referring to Hannah's reputation as a wild child and an exotic, indiscriminate lover, but James shrugged. For one, the girl had little by way of an upper lip - perhaps the cause of overcompensation in piercing the lower one - and two, her twin brother was a Slytherin.

Class started and James' restlessness built. He tapped his fingers on his desk. He sighed, a lot, and cleared his throat a few times. He even transfigured his textbook *History of Magic*, into several infinitely more interesting things, including a pillow - which he napped on. They'd been using the same textbook since first year, and it seemed impossible to get through the entire thing. By this year, they were just reaching the midway point. James sighed again, unable to sleep, and let his eyes wander, continuing to rest his head on the pillow.

He skipped naturally over the males in the room, as if they simply weren't there. Even Sirius was unworthy of his absentminded ogling. James watched Alice sensuously push her straight auburn hair over her shoulder, exposing her soft creamy neck. Jeanine, whose thick brown hair reminded James of sweet hot cocoa, curled her long wanton legs under her, her skirt draping suggestively over her warm thigh.

Beside her, innocent Lily Evans stared wide-eyed at the board, her bright green eyes noting every stroke of Binns' chalk. Her face twitched and she sniffed. James cocked an eyebrow. A second later, after several more rapid sniffles, she sneezed a high, timid "shooo." James shot up, gaping openmouthed at her. Her sneeze was the exact same pitch and volume as a golden snitch whisking past his ear.

Sirius noticed James' attention to Lily. Sure, she made a cute face when she sneezed, but Prongs looked like he'd just seen the most adorable ghost pop out of his showerhead; his face was in turmoil between admiration and fear. Sirius shook his head and returned to flicking parchment bits at Natalie Buchanan.